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DOI:

[10.1177/1746847717752591](https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847717752591)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Holliday, C. (2018). Pixar's America: The Re-Animation of American Myths and Symbols. By Dietmar Meinel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 13(1), 88-90.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847717752591>

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Dietmar Meinel, *Pixar's America: The Re-Animation of American Myths and Symbols*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 240 pp.: ISBN 978 3 31931633 8, £60 (hbk)

Reinventing animation as a computer-generated medium, the release of the Pixar Animation Studios film *Toy Story* (1995) on 22nd November 1995 reflected a highly charged period of 1990s digital integration during which computer technology was quickly standardised into mainstream filmmaking practice. The promise of virtual reality and the visual possibilities of 'the digital' as a technology of production and representation expanded Hollywood's computer graphics community, transforming North American cinema into a battleground on which the accomplishments of CGI were openly fought. The advent of the computer-animated film at the hands of Pixar exerted a powerful force over the Hollywood animation industry, with digital technologies eclipsing cel-animated technique with their seeming limitless capability for animating sophisticated screen worlds. Starting out as a visual effects company and a pioneer of three-dimensional computer graphics, Pixar's name is rightly etched into both this recent history of popular animation in America and the contemporary landscape of blockbuster Hollywood cinema. Dietmar Meinel's highly engaging *Pixar's America: The Re-Animation of American Myths and Symbols* (2016) is a welcome addition to an emergent field of 'Pixar Studies' that, in assuming the mantle from Disney Studies that emerged during the mid-1990s, not only confronts Pixar's ever-increasing significance within American film history, but likewise takes studio authorship as the cue for igniting the complex political charge of today's feature-length animated cartoons.

When placed alongside recent book-length accounts of the studio's maturation and evolving corporate relationships (Paik 2007; Price 2009), as well as the wave of recent publications that unpack the studio's celebrated feature film canon via rigorous ideological critique (Wooden and Gillam 2014; Rösing 2016; Herhuth 2017), Meinel's book confidently adds to this emergent critical narrative by placing Pixar within the throes of cultural, political and social examination. As its title suggests, *Pixar's America* is ultimately geared towards the studio's animated features as in persistent conversation with American culture, and is therefore strongly enunciative of American tropes and mythology. Throughout the book's extensive introduction, Meinel expertly weaves together a multitude of competing historical and theoretical contexts. From cultural and Marxist theory to scholarship drawn from animation studies (though the richness of the latter feels somewhat reduced in parts), the introduction stakes the claim for Pixar's 'refashioning of traditional American figures, motifs, and tropes for contemporary sensibilities' (p. 2). Beginning with their industrial contribution to digital effects technology and the development of RenderMan and IceMan software that 'continues to define Pixar's superiority' (p. 5), the introduction takes in a broad range of touchstones that help orient 'Pixar' as a name entirely synonymous with computer-animated film

production. While much of the information presented in these opening stages rehearses (perhaps unavoidably) the hagiographic register of earlier studio histories (notably David Price's book *The Pixar Touch: The Making of a Company* [2009], which is enthusiastically cited), the coverage is impressive in explicating the technological and artistic capital of Pixar (p. 6) at the same time as the introduction brands the studio's animated films as 'instruments of American exceptionalism' (p. 15). Indebted to a post-1968 film theory of structuralism and semiotics, which exposed mainstream narrative cinema's relation to structures of ideology and power, Meinel locates Pixar within a wider critical discourse of ideological critique in which American imperialism is dually transmitted and perpetuated across and through popular culture. Representing for Meinel 'the threat of cinematic interpellation', for example, Pixar 'markets its seemingly naïve and harmless entertainment products to the most susceptible of their all-age audience: children' (p. 15). As the author appropriately recognises, the customary structures shaping the ideological analysis of Pixar are those that have been applied to animated forms ever since Chilean Marxists Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How to read Donald Duck* (1975) first deconstructed the imperialist ideology of the Disney comic books. Yet Meinel further nuances and challenges these 'same old' debates of social pedagogy by identifying the complexities of Pixar as purveyor of cultural products through a strongly U.S. national narrative.

The subsequent rolling structure of the book, with individual chapters focused on case studies of particular Pixar films bookended by *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 3* (2010), pays dividends as it awards the overarching argument a natural sense of progression between examples. While the decision to undo the book's clear chronological arrangement in Chapters 8 and 9 (on *The Incredibles* [2004] and *Cars* [2006] respectively) does strike the reader as strange, the close critical readings offered by Meinel cumulatively and effectively construct Pixar's contact with 'imperial practices' (p. 34) via their allegorising of American cultural myths and symbols. Framed by the book's objective to locate Pixar (as both animation studio and cultural phenomenon) within a series of American historical and cultural flashpoints, Meinel assuredly examines the specificity and 'datedness' (p. 34) of highly allusive symbolism contained within Pixar's narratives to enforce their deep-rooted potential for political investigation. *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) protagonist Mike Wazowski is, for example, symbolic of 'a counter-capitalist moment' (p. 90) via his transgressive figuring as a monstrous schlemiel fully marked by continual failure and ineptitude, while *Ratatouille's* (2007) narrative of a journeying rat colony 'visually refers to the experiences of late nineteenth-century immigration and steerage passages to the United States' (pp. 100–101). As is perhaps the nature of any ideological examination of mainstream cinema, the politics of interpretation (and of popular animation as symbolic form) often requires a leap to conclusions. But any such deductions are here smoothed over by Meinel's convincing textual and contextual analyses that broaden the scope of contemporary animation's ideological potential. Yet this same 'datedness' of Pixar's animated features also impinges on the timeliness of the study. The methodological risk taken with studio-focused accounts is one rooted in the danger of immediate anachronism. With Hollywood animation a rapidly accelerating art form (as Meinel stresses in his lengthy introduction), *Pixar's America* deliberately or otherwise overlooks the studio's more recent

films, including *Cars 2* (2011). Given its technologically-heavy spy narrative, *Cars 2* would certainly have provided a fertile comparative piece to the book's penultimate chapter on the romanticised jeremiad longing of the all-American *Cars* and its nostalgic invocation of 'frontier (auto)mobility' (p. 194).

As Meinel's book reaches its climax some chapters are also noticeably shorter in length, thereby making quick work of what are complex, fascinating ideas. The majority of chapters are twenty pages, yet the concluding chapter on *Toy Story 3*'s connections to the post-9/11 war on terror via the classifying of Sunnyside Daycare as a 'totalitarian political regime' requiring American liberation (p. 212) feels far too brief, sadly running to only ten. However, the desire to want more is merely a symptom of the success of Meinel's overall project. Robust in deepening the critical discussion of mainstream U.S. animation by accounting for the complexities of the studio's pervasive 'national consensus' (p. 56), *Pixar's America* successfully strengthens the growing body of Pixar-centric work steeped in the durable analytical traditions of story structure and characterisation.

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Author Biography

Christopher Holliday teaches Film Studies at King's College London specializing in film genre, international film history and contemporary digital media/animation. He has published several book chapters on animation, including articles in *Animation Practice, Process & Production* and *animation: an interdisciplinary journal*. He is currently writing a monograph on the computer-animated feature film, and is co-editing a collection of essays for Routledge's *AFI Film Readers* series that examines the historical, cultural and theoretical points of intersection between fantasy and animation.